

A walk down Hill Street

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SHE was the pride of our once-little town where everyone knew each other.



Nicknamed Ah Lek Goo (which in Hakka means “clever girl”), she was one of the 26 children of Chai Loy, a wealthy local merchant.

She was a gifted soprano and would render the legendary Chinese actress and singer Chow Suen’s songs to the delight of the neighbourhood.

Many expected Ah Lek Goo to finish school with a Cambridge Certificate (equivalent to SPM), get a job and be married. That was the sum total of the ambition of a girl during the 1950s. But Ah Lek Goo had other plans.

Returning to Kajang after completing her Teacher’s Training, she taught for several years in Yu Hua School and Kajang High School. She found teaching dull and longed for something more challenging. But nothing was available for an ambitious young woman in that era.

Then, it happened – a new school was about to open on Hill Street (now known as Jalan Bukit). The Selangor Education Department (was looking for candidates for the position of headmaster. It was to be a co-educational school and the vacancy was for a male.

With no prior experience in school administration and at an age too young to be a head-mistress, the slender, cheongsam-clad Ah Lek Goo put in her application. And to her surprise, she was given the job. Ah Lek Goo or Miss Chai Yook Chin, as she became known, was the youngest, female school head in Kajang town.

Running the Hill Street school was a challenge. Unlike the premier schools at that time – Kajang High School and Kajang Convent (now SMK Convent Kajang), the Hill Street School did not attract the best brains in town because it was still new.

Funding was also a problem. It was a small school and the parent-teacher association did not have much money or influence.

It was difficult also to get good, experienced teachers to come to Hill Street.

Yook Chin made it a point to religiously visit the Selangor Education Department every Saturday to ask for advice and learn the job. She was stymied by the pay sheet because Mathematics was not her favourite subject.

Humbly, she begged the finance clerk in charge of her school to teach her. She learnt the pay sheet and made a good friend who later became her husband.

Being young and inexperienced, Yook Chin learnt early the art of pestering. She found that if she were to go every Saturday and ask the officer in charge of say, furniture for the staffroom,

again and again persistently, she would normally get what she requested in the end.

Thus, her Saturdays were sacrificed “haunting” the officers in charge of various facilities for her fledging school.

She was a natural leader and soon won the respect and co-operation of the teachers. They worked hard under her leadership and she made sure that she took care of their welfare. She knew instinctively not to micro-manage. She was easy-going and respected her teachers. They repaid her trust with good teaching.

With adequate facilities and a good staff, the Hill Street school began to attract good students. Slowly but surely, it began to produce students with 5As for the Standard Five Examinations (which is equivalent to our UPSR). From a small school, Hill Street was upgraded to a B school. In 1980, I enrolled in Standard One in Hill Street. I was proud to have such a good headmistress because she was my mother. Everywhere we went, people recognised my mother and they spoke highly of her. The townsfolk were proud that a local girl had made good and become a headmistress.

Yook Chin would have been content to be Hill Street’s headmistress until her retirement. However, in 1986, the premier school, Kajang Convent School, did not have a headmistress. The Selangor Education Department urged her to take on the post. She was reluctant because the school was an A school and naturally, the position came with bigger and more responsibilities. But with more coaxing, she took on the challenge with a heavy heart.

She worked in Convent until her retirement. She made sure that the teachers got new facilities and staffed the teaching team with many more able teachers. However, I believe in her heart of hearts, she still missed her baby, Hill Street (which is now called SRJK Jalan Bukit 1).

As Hill Street and Convent grew, so did the town. The influx of many outsiders especially in the time after her retirement made the relationship among the residents of Kajang distant. As the years went by, no one remembered Mrs. Mah Peng Wai and her contributions to Convent Kajang School. Her beloved Hill Street remembers her name no more. Many of the townsfolk who heard her sing had passed on or moved away.

When she died at the age of 65 in the year 2000, she was only mourned by her family and church friends.

Yet she left a legacy – not only in Hill Street or Convent but also in me, her only child. Although I had witnessed how the job of a headmistress had taken a toll on my mother’s health and the sacrifices she had to make for her schools, I still ventured into the education line. No, I am not a headmistress – I do not have her capabilities but I share her passion in providing quality education.

As an English teacher, I am doing my bit for education in Malaysia.